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## EXPLAINER

# Trauma-Informed Criminal Justice

## Part One of a Four-Part Series

August 2023

### Summary/Introduction

Trauma is a nearly [universal](#) experience among individuals in the criminal justice system, including victims, witnesses, the accused or convicted, and criminal justice professionals. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), [trauma](#) results from “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening.” This experience changes neural pathways, impacts daily functioning and can trigger “[survival brain](#),” wherein people have difficulty assessing risk and engaging in appropriate coping skills.

Victims and witnesses, often referred to as the “[forgotten players](#)” in the judicial process, experience direct and vicarious trauma. Unresolved trauma is associated with maladaptive coping strategies, including [aggression](#), [the abuse of drugs or alcohol](#), and [later system involvement](#).

Compared to the general public, [inmates](#) experience significantly more [violence](#), [trauma](#) and [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#), the severity of which is associated with higher rates of [arrest and recidivism](#). Incarceration can exacerbate existing symptoms or birth new ones, a concept referred to as [Post-Incarceration Syndrome \(PICS\)](#).

[Criminal justice professionals](#) also experience disproportionately higher rates of [vicarious trauma](#), [secondary traumatic stress](#), [compassion fatigue](#) and [burnout](#) than the general public. The judicial process and various professionals’ interactions with victims and witnesses can also impart trauma and reduce the likelihood that they will [report future crimes](#), [be cooperative with police and prosecutors](#), [seek support resources](#) or appear [credible](#) on the stand. As a result, there is a growing effort to [educate](#) and [advocate](#) for the adoption of trauma-informed and trauma-responsive criminal justice [policies](#) and [practices](#). These approaches [improve victim outcomes](#), [decrease inmate misconduct](#), [reduce recidivism](#), [increase public safety](#), and [decrease occupational stress and burnout](#).

### Background

The [concept of trauma](#) and its impact on health and behavior originated in the 1970s, following a rise in mental health and substance abuse disorders among Vietnam War veterans. [PTSD](#) was included in the third edition of the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980. This signaled a shift to the provision of trauma-informed care in public health and human services.

The connection between childhood trauma and harmful life outcomes including chronic disease, criminality and early death was established in a [landmark study](#) of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in 1998. These [ACEs](#) include physical, emotional and sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect; divorce; having a mother or stepmother who has been treated violently; an incarcerated household member; or a parent or guardian with mental illness or substance abuse issues. The survey was administered to adults to report their childhood experiences. Individuals who reported [four or more ACEs](#), compared to those with none, were four to 12 times more likely to have physical and mental health issues, engage in problematic alcohol or drug use, commit suicide, overdose on opiates or be incarcerated. Childhood abuse and neglect also [impair brain development](#), executive functioning and reasoning, predisposing people to aggression and defiance that was linked to [juvenile delinquency and adult criminality](#).



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### Why a Trauma-informed Approach to Criminal Justice is Critical

The number of ACEs among adult inmates is significantly higher than that of the general population. **Ninety-eight percent** of inmates, compared to 64 percent of the general population, have experienced at least one ACE. **Seventy-eight percent** of inmates have experienced four or more, while the same is true for only 15.8 percent of the general population. This is especially true for female inmates who experience **significantly more lifetime victimization** than non-incarcerated women. Victim-offender overlap, or the relationship between being a victim of a crime, then becoming an offender is well established: **Most offenders have been victims**, either as a child, an adult or both.

Criminal justice professionals are regularly exposed to personal and vicarious acute and cumulative traumas in **police response, judicial processing, incarceration** and in their supervision of **probationers and parolees/reentrants** in the community. One **study** found that 53.4 percent of correctional officers and 35.3 percent of police officers, compared to 6.8 percent of adults in the general population, experienced or live with PTSD. Probation and parole officers and attorneys also experience higher levels of trauma-related **stress and burnout**. The exposure to trauma can change a **professional's worldview**, impact decision making and produce harmful physical, emotional and behavioral health changes. Unsurprisingly, these professions have disproportionately higher rates of **substance use or abuse** and **suicide**.

### A New Way Forward

A **trauma-informed approach to criminal justice** mitigates reciprocal trauma and enhances the interactions between professionals and the people they serve. According to the **SAMHSA**, trauma-informed policies and practices focus on four “Rs”:



**REALIZE**  
the presence of trauma and understand its effect on individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities



**RECOGNIZE**  
the signs and symptoms of trauma



**RESPOND**  
by applying the principles of a trauma-informed approach to all areas of functioning



**RESIST**  
re-traumatization of clients as well as staff

The **National Institute of Corrections** refers to the approach as an essential element for justice settings and the approach is supported by the U.S. Department of Justice. **Many states and the federal government** have also proposed legislation to promote trauma-informed practices.

It is an undisputed fact that people interacting with and within the criminal justice system experience trauma, whether acute or cumulative; personal or vicarious. In order to serve all persons involved in the legal system effectively, it is imperative that organizations consider adopting trauma-informed policies and practices. These hold individuals accountable while equipping them with the resources they need to become law-abiding. These approaches can also enhance public safety and save taxpayer dollars. For professionals and organizations, trauma-informed practices reduce occupational stress, burnout and turnover, and improve decision making.

“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to walk through water without getting wet.”

Rachel Naomi Remen,  
Kitchen Table Wisdom 1996

### Contact us

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